

A HIGH and HOLY CALLING

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A HIGH and HOLY CALLING

*Essays of Encouragement for the
Church and Its Musicians*

PAUL WESTERMEYER

FOREWORD BY
ZEBULON M. HIGHBEN


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To the
Twin Cities Chapter of the
American Guild of Organists and its Board
with gratitude for the opportunity
to serve you as your Dean



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Foreword

A number of years ago, the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians produced a poster print titled “The Role of the Cantor.” The print featured six statements, rendered in an attractive calligraphic script, that defined the work and worth of church musicians. At the time, the historical term *cantor* was not widely used in American Lutheran parishes. Part of the rationale behind the print was to help recover the term while reminding all church musicians of their vocation as leaders of the people’s song, regardless of their individual titles or job descriptions. The title of this book, *A High and Holy Calling*, is taken from that print. It is an apt title, because it points directly to this volume’s unifying theme: Church musicians have a vocation, and it is an important one.

Paul Westermeyer has been writing about the vocation of church musicians for almost as long as he has been writing. His first book was a practical guide to the nuts-and-bolts of the cantor’s work: study, practice, employment, clergy-musician relationships, and knowing and capably serving the assembly.¹ His most recent book (prior to this one) reflected more deeply on the cantor’s vocation, the history that shapes that vocation, and the current cultural and ecclesial challenges that church musicians face.² Between those two texts are myriad books and articles about other topics in church music—it is a rare church musician’s library that does not include at least a few Westermeyer volumes—but it can rightly be said that a substantial part of Paul’s vocation has been to remind church musicians of the value of their own.

Anyone who has worked for very long in the church in any capacity knows that such service brings abundant joy, but also sorrow and suffering. For twenty-first century church musicians, the suffering frequently includes disparagement of their calling: Music in worship is treated as decorative rather than substantive; culturally driven marketing concerns are prioritized over assembly song; and the church musician’s expertise and experience are undervalued, both within the church and in outside

1. Westermeyer, *The Church Musician*.

2. Westermeyer, *Church Musicians: Reflections on Their Craft, Call, History, and Challenges*.

musical circles. Such denigration has become so ubiquitous that it is often not malevolent or personal; it is no less painful for that.

And this brings us to the present volume. *A High and Holy Calling* is really a devotional book. The topics of these brief essays vary widely, but woven through all of them like an ostinato or *leitmotif* is a profound sense of hope and gratitude for the work that church musicians do. This is Westermeyer at his most pastoral, offering a word of solace, support, and inspiration to those who make music in the church, no matter their contexts or circumstances.

To quote the author: “Be of good cheer.” And read on, to be reminded once again of the worthiness of this good work, and the holiness of being called to do it.

Zebulon M. Highben

Preface

I did not intend to write this book. I was asked on a number of occasions, in response to lectures I gave or articles I wrote, whether I planned to publish them. Church musicians especially asked about this. One day I scanned some of this material and realized it had a common theme with an underlying assumption: that Christ's promise to sustain the church¹ is not about our attempts to prop up dying institutions. It's about trusting God to sustain the church, as promised, and then doing what we are called to do without fear. It's about the call to live out our vocations in our particular contexts. In the words of José Aguiar's hymn, translated by Gerhard Cartford,

The Lord now sends us forth with hands to serve and give,
to make of all the earth a better place to live.
The angels are not sent into our world of pain.
to do what we were meant to do in Jesus' name:
That falls to you and me and all who are made free.
Help us, O Lord, we pray, to do your will today.²

My assumption about Christ's promise had, I discovered, resulted in a common theme of perspective on and encouragement for the church and its musicians. That theme was not generated by my wishful thinking, but by God's promise. Whether our time is much different from any other time is an open question, but our time is certainly perplexing for church musicians who are under attack from often contradictory quarters and who are asking for help. I decided that it might be helpful to respond to their requests and see if a book could be fashioned as a resource for those in need of perspective or encouragement. Ours is a high and holy calling,³ and we are wise to be reminded of that.

1. See Matthew 16:18 and 28:20.

2. This hymn appears in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #538. There it is listed as "anonymous," but it was later found to be by José Aguiar. See Westermeyer, *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 371.

3. "A high and holy calling" is from the last line of a poster titled "The Role of the Cantor" which some of us fashioned for the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians. See page ii.

The first twelve chapters are short reflections from columns I wrote as Dean of the Twin Cities Chapter of the American Guild of Organists, for the Chapter's monthly newsletter, *Pipenotes*. They are oriented toward organists. The next section of chapters about hymn performance is a set of four articles requested for *The Hymn*, the journal of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada. Similarly, they are oriented toward organists, as well as anybody else who leads hymns, however they do it. The third section segues from hymns to vocation. The first of its chapters began as a plenary speech to the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada as it celebrated the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. The next chapter was stimulated by questions I have had for a long time about J. S. Bach's *Clavierübung III*. The one after that began as a speech at Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, celebrating the legacy of Paul Manz. I edited all of these and added two more. I hope the result is a helpful book whose chapters can be read individually, in clusters, or as a whole.

I write as a Lutheran in the United States of America with a deeply ecumenical concern for the other parts and places of the church. I think that for there to be any genuine understanding and dialogue we have to work from our particular vantage points, though not uncritically, in view of the whole. We have to learn about and seek to understand the whole as best we can, but trying to be or represent what we are not leads us astray. I hope that what I say is helpful across the church, East and West. Those in traditions other than mine can apply it in their circumstances as I apply what they say in mine. I hope this contributes to the rich mosaic of the church.

Paul Westermeyer

I. REFLECTIONS

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Communal Wisdom

The Twin Cities Chapter of the American Guild of Organists has regularly sponsored “organ crawls.” These are visits to various churches to hear the resident organ played by a few organists, after which the listeners can get a closer look at the instrument and discuss what they heard. Fine players and playing, contrasting organs and spaces, and a variety of attendees characterize these occasions. The last component, a variety of attendees, needs to be highlighted. Organists and those with organ interests are usually present as would be expected, but so are congregational members of the churches and people from the surrounding neighborhoods who come from a number of vocational and other backgrounds. They may or may not be well acquainted with organs. This circumstance reminds me of an experience with just such people.

The committee at Ascension Lutheran Church, just outside Chicago, who called me to be their cantor, told me that the congregation did not sing very well. They asked if I could help. Yes, I said, I could do that. Then they told me that their organ was in bad shape (all too evident!) and asked if I could help them figure out what to do about it. I said I was not an organ virtuoso nor an organ expert, but I could provide them with resources and figure it out with them. The church formed a committee, I supplied them with data, and we went to work.¹

It became obvious that we needed to hear various possibilities. So, I found churches in Chicago with contrasting organs from as wide a spectrum as possible, and we set out on organ crawls. The ground rules were

1. In 2016, the Twin Cities Chapter of the American Guild of Organists made a twenty-five-minute video to help churches engaged in projects of this kind. The video, *A Guide for Organ Committees*, tells the story of the Glatter-Götz/Rosales pipe organ at Augustana Lutheran Church in West St. Paul, Minnesota.

these: At each organ, I played exactly the same contrasting pieces and led the committee in singing exactly the same hymns. It was important that I—their normal organist—played, not a virtuoso who might try to sell them a particular organ, or otherwise add an extra variable. What happened when we removed these variables was interesting. Their requests that I tell them what to do receded. I had resisted their wishes that I figure this out for them and had told them that we needed to do it together. They began to discern differences in organs and what these differences might mean in their building, with their congregation, its singing, and its musical possibilities. The committee decided to buy a fine organ from an excellent builder which fit the space beautifully both in sight and sound, and represented very responsible stewardship of their resources.

That experience underlined what I had learned many times before: congregations are smart. They can choose a representative committee well. People with very little background in a given area can learn and discern well, hear well, and figure things out for the good of the whole. Organ crawls were central to this project—for normal human beings, not organ enthusiasts, giving falsehood to the notion that normal people don't like organs.

When I lead forums in churches, even about pretty obvious things, I often get this response: "Why didn't anybody tell us this before?" That, along with organ crawls and similar projects, suggests that we sell one another short. If we assemble all of the information we can, make it available to all of us, and work together with requisite checks and balances, we can do amazing things. Our life together, musically as well as otherwise, benefits from our shared communal wisdom.

Item: Organ crawls attract not only organ enthusiasts and musicians, but also people from surrounding neighborhoods, some of whom will tell you that they know little or nothing about music or organs.

Item: My brother-in-law, one of those who professes this lack of knowledge and who thinks he cannot sing at all, has on more than one occasion sent me a long article about organs from his local paper.

Item: I was recently at my seminary class reunion, sitting next to a former classmate (who became a very fine and faithful pastor) at a worship service. He did not sing a note, just as in chapel services when we were students.

Item: I know wonderful people in the churches I have served who did not sing.

Item: A former colleague with little to no musical training has collected many recordings of classical music.

All of these people understand and appreciate more about music and organs than they say they do. My brother-in-law asks intelligent questions. He once came to a choral concert I conducted, and afterward asked about a piece which he identified as “that piece which came around to the beginning again.” He was hearing the music’s form. The colleague with the record collection compares different interpretations of the same symphony with more insight than many musicians. My seminary classmate and most of the folks in churches who don’t sing are appreciative of musicians and the music for which we are responsible. Sometimes their comments are more perceptive than they realize.

The people in the communities we serve include musical experts, people who know little about music in a formal sense, people who find music

important, and people who find it unimportant. In the October 28, 2015, issue of *The Christian Century*, twelve people gave a wide spread of experiences related to “song.” And, yes, some people have less appreciative points of view, like C. S. Lewis. He thought hymns were the gang songs of the church. Erik Routley characterized his position as having a “good shout.”¹ People in Lewis’s mold prefer spoken services called “Low Mass” in Roman Catholic circles, similar spoken services from the Book of Common Prayer among Episcopalians, less liturgical forms of worship where there is no music at all as in Ulrich Zwingli² in the Reformed stream, or the worship of Quakers which avoids all set forms other than silence and what individuals many feel compelled to say at the moment. All of these groups in their communal practice gradually but invariably seem to push toward a musical expression, but that does not deny the individuals who prefer silence and words without music. They are present in all of our communities. Their wisdom should not be overlooked or regarded pejoratively. They know intuitively—and by their attendance demonstrate—that spoken services are more musical in their communal, mnemonic, and proto-musical flow than services where music is used as an intrusive disruption or an assault on the purpose of a worshiping assembly.

This wide and colorful spectrum characterizes individuals who together make up the communities we serve. The culture presumes that everything is controlled by the analysis of how to win in a chosen category, such as in the common divisions by generation or taste or status or education or likes and dislikes. One of the problems with this presupposition is that people in our communities have a diverse array of age, likes, dislikes, knowledge, abilities, and appreciation—or not—of music. They don’t match the flat and bland skew of our statistical analyses, agendas, or simplistic notions. This disjuncture is one of the things that continually reminds us of the way the church’s music bubbles up against the grain of the culture’s lack of concern for the neighbor. Music does not serve statistics, agendas, or simplistic ideas. It serves real people—delightfully!

1. Routley, “Correspondence with an Anglican Who Dislikes Hymns,” 17.

2. Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) was a leader of the Reformation in Switzerland and the most musical of the sixteenth-century Reformers. Nevertheless, he abolished the historic worship of the church and all music—congregational singing, choirs, organs, and instruments of any kind.

Beauty, Hospitality, and Compassion

In the June 2014 issue of *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, the journal of the American Guild of Organists, National Chaplain Don Saliers reminded us that “in a culture of distraction, greed, and cruelty, the experience of beauty becomes essential to our humanity.”¹ He had more in mind than the superficial sense by which we often define beauty. He cited Alejandro Garcia-Rivera’s book *The Community of the Beautiful*, which describes a community of hospitality and compassion. This is related to what I once heard Saliers say about a children’s choir that sang at worship. When he asked the children after the service what they liked about singing, one of them said, “It tastes so good.” In his book *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven*, John Eliot Gardiner gets at matters like this when he says that Bach “makes it a great deal easier for us to focus on the injunction to love one’s neighbor than on all the filth and horror of the world. We emerge from performing or listening to a Bach motet chastened, maybe, but more often elated, such is the cleansing power of the music.”²

The beauty, hospitality, and compassion that these writers allude to do not happen without patience, persistence, and the long hours of composing and practice that are a constant companion for musicians and their craft. Organists spend large portions of their lives alone at organs in otherwise empty churches, perfecting their skills so that they can serve their communities as well as possible. Both parts of this rhythm are necessary—the time spent in solitude and the time spent in community. Solitude without community destructively turns in on itself by blocking the intrinsic nature of music to share. Community without disciplined preparation betrays the

1. Don Saliers, “Beauty, Holiness, and Everyday,” 12.

2. Gardiner, *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven*, 478.

group by treating it poorly with music that never sings. Music itself, however, pushes toward a healthy symbiotic mix in both directions. And it ties beauty together with hospitality and compassion.

Our culture militates against both directions and against the union. It does not generate disciplined persistence except as it glorifies the self. It does not generate communal concerns because an individual “where’s mine?” is the driver. And it highlights the celebrities so that those who do their jobs in service to their communities, out of the spotlight, are often made to feel pretty unimportant.

These issues, however we try to define or describe them (and they are finally indescribable and undefinable), nonetheless attend us all in all of our music-making. We are tempted to restrict them to certain composers or virtuosos or performances, when in fact they belong to all of us and to the communities we serve. When a fourth-grader sings a stunningly beautiful solo in an anthem and takes your breath away; when a clarinetist spins out a gorgeous descant above the choir; when the choir sings with a balance, tone color, and phrasing beyond anything you could possibly have expected; and when your hymn playing and the congregation’s singing coalesce with a potency you had not anticipated, then what Saliers, García-Rivera, and Gardiner are reporting is palpable. It is present among us who are not the stars, but who are engaged in the weekly craft of music with our people.

We can’t manufacture these moments, though they would not be there without our work. Nor should we try to manufacture them. Beauty, hospitality, and compassion are there without our forcing them. They are there in the quotidian—the daily, the usual, the customary—character of what we do. This is no small thing in our “culture of distraction, greed, and cruelty.” We should celebrate it with our people in all of its understated wonder and grace.

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